Blog posts

Europe's fourth power

A Brussels diary Part 4

Ahead of the European elections on 22 May, Betto van Waarden describes the daily routine of decision-making in Brussels

Exclusive 15 May, by Betto van Waarden

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"Although I had already worked at the Council [of the European Union] for six years, I did not really understand how the EU functions until I took over the presidency," says the Lithuanian chair of a Council working party about his country's Council presidency in 2013. Raising his champagne for a toast during a lunch, he jokes: "In fact, everyone who comes to Brussels should start with chairing the Council to learn how everything works."

A member state does not chair the Council often. With 28 members, each takes on the six-month presidency once every 14 years, so by the time a country is up again, many staff members have different jobs or have retired, and the state takes on the job with few experienced officials. The newer, East European, states don't have any experience, and small ones like Malta and Luxembourg barely have the bureaucratic peoplepower to take the helm from one day to the next. That's why the Council has a sizeable Secretariat-General that assists the chairing states and provides the necessary expertise and continuity. "But", an Irish chair told me, "we [Ireland] thought that the Secretariat was supposed to assist us, but the Secretariat is in fact a fourth power in Europe with its own agenda".

In practice the work of the Secretariat is no luxury. All individual chairs of the Council working parties must first learn the ropes. "The Council presidency is just like a traineeship with the Council. The member state arrives and has no clue what it has to do. The Secretariat then holds its hand and teaches it how everything works," a Secretariat worker told me. "Some really have no idea, like the Cypriots [2012], but others are very good, like the Irish [2013]." I noticed that many Lithuanians — who took over from the Irish — were very cautious. Once a state objected during a meeting, they immediately wanted to give in to

keep everyone happy, instead of steering the discussion and Council position as the Irish often did. The Greeks were more experienced and had a more assertive style, probably because of instructions from destitute Athens to be critical of any new proposal, and especially of any new expenditure. But the Greek chairs had to operate on a lower budget and could not rely on the civil service back home; when I had to organise a visit of the director-general for education and culture to Athens, I got caught up in bureaucratic chaos on the Greek side. It's not easy for countries to lead Europe, but I was surprised by the conclusion of the Secretariat worker: "They should just give more power to the Council Secretariat. It can do the work by itself. The chairs are just figureheads."

The Secretariat takes its role very seriously. During a briefing with the Commission, the Irish chairs of the working party for cultural affairs and the Secretariat, I suggested that, to avoid lengthy discussions among member states, it might be useful if the Irish indicated that they had noted states' positions during the previous meeting (where the states' representatives had gone on for hours saying which amendments they agreed and disagreed with). After the briefing, someone whispered to me that I should never say something like that again and that some people wanted to strangle me. I had thought I could offer a practical contribution to the discussion, but insiders interpreted this as "the Commission telling the Council how to do its work". Even at minor consultations you cannot escape major institutional divisions.

Sometimes the Secretariat's will to power seems to hinder the policy process. After Ireland's presidency, a former Irish chair complained to me that she had had no idea of all the political feuds between the Secretariat and the European Parliament, and even within the Secretariat. She sighed that it cost a lot of time and effort to navigate those conflicts. Her colleague said that a member of the Secretariat "always got annoyed when Ireland invited the Commission and others to meetings. He always wanted to 'be strategic' and only talk to certain people. Whereas we thought that all of us — including the Commission — were in the same boat and had to find solutions together." During the Lithuanian presidency, the Secretariat also misinformed states. States wanted to hear the outcome of the initial deliberations on the European Capitals of Culture; Parliament had indicated during negotiations that it was willing to find a compromise, but the Secretariat claimed Parliament thought a compromise was out of the question, so negotiations were prolonged for months, and organisation in Ireland and Croatia was jeopardised. Such situations lead to rifts between officials of the Commission and Secretariat, and also between officials of the Presidency country and Secretariat, who don't talk anymore.

The Secretariat has an important role and it's understandable that, after the Treaty of Lisbon, it tries to limit the relative loss of power of the Council in relation to Parliament. (The Council used to be to main legislative power, and

now it shares that role with Parliament.) It's good there is a division of powers in Europe and that the Secretariat assists the presidency in containing the overenthusiastic Commission (and Parliament). There are power games in all organisations. But it's strange that the Secretariat, which has a supportive role, is acting like an independent fourth power, sometimes hindering the policy process for the sake of obstruction rather than for constructive improvement. (Eurosceptics concerned about a "democratic deficit" in Europe will be excited by this.) I feel I'm part of the Stanford prison experiment or the German film based on it, Das Experiment: participants in a game are given certain powers and enter so far into their roles they lose sight of reality.